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AUTHOR Gramling, Robert B.; Brabant, Sarah
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ABSTRACT

A study examined two models--increased opportunity and affirmative action--as proposed solutions to sex inequities in wage and occupational distribution. The Increased Opportunity Model assumes that increased economic opportunities will disproportionately benefit women and minorities because of their relative position in the labor force. The Affirmative Action Model contends that the problem of inequity cannot be solved with increased opportunities in the labor market because the inequities are creations of that market. To compare the validity of the two models, researchers collected data pertaining to the yearly income, occupation, place of residence, and sex of 1,560 members of the labor force in East St. Mary Parish, Louisiana. Next, they compared this employment data with similar data for the State of Louisiana. Based on their comparisons, the researchers concluded that increased opportunity will not, in and of itself, reduce sex inequities. Therefore, they called for further research to delineate the impediments to increased female labor force participation in order to pinpoint effectively appropriate affirmative action strategies. (MN)

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INCREASED OPPORTUNITY VERSUS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF SEX INEQUITY

Robert B. Gramling and Sarah Brabant

University of Southwestern Louisiana

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Robert B. Gramling
Box 43530, USL
Lafayette, LA 70504
(318) 231-5375 (office)
(318) 332-4505 (home)

or

Sarah Brabant
Box 40198, USL
Lafayette, LA 70504
(318) 231-6089 (office)
(318) 235-7656 (home)

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines two models (Increased Opportunity and Affirmative Action) as proposed solutions to sex inequities in wage and occupational distribution. Comparing data obtained in an area of rapid economic growth with statewide data, the paper demonstrates that increased opportunity will not in and of itself reduce sex inequities. The conclusion that affirmative action is necessary if changes in the status quo are to occur has major implications for social policy considerations.

INCREASED OPPORTUNITY VERSUS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF SEX INEQUITY

Introduction

Women's participation in the labor force has received increasing attention since World War II. Early studies were demographic considerations and focused primarily on change in number and distribution of women workers (e.g., Blau, Ferriss, Oppenheimer). The continued or increased concentration of women in sex-typed jobs and the persistent wage differential between men and women prompted numerous attempts to explain the inequity (e.g., Darian, Eriksen and Klein, Goldberg, Horner, Ireson, Long). These studies concentrated on individual or human capital factors. The results have been questioned seriously (e.g., Ferber and Huber, Levine and Crumrine, Suter and Miller).

Some writers have focused on the labor market itself as an important factor in sex inequity (e.g., Blau, Chenoweth and Maret-Havens, Oppenheimer, Rosenfeld, Safilios-Rothschild, Stevenson). Their arguments have been, for the most part, historical or speculative in nature. At least two conditions in the market, however, have been proposed as critical factors in the elimination of inequities. The first is a healthy growing economy; the second is affirmative action. To date there has been little substantive research to assess the effect of these factors. The off-shore oil boom in southern Louisiana and the concomitant expansion of the employment market affords an opportunity to examine the impact of a growing economy on women workers and to assess the relative impacts of the two factors.

Rationale

It is the contention of this paper that proposed actions to correct sex inequities in the labor market fall into two broad categories or models: Increased Opportunities and Affirmative Action.

INCREASED OPPORTUNITY MODEL

The Increased Opportunity Model assumes if increased economic opportunities, i.e., more and better paying jobs, become available, women, or minorities because of their relative position in the labor force, will disproportionately benefit and inequities will gradually disappear. Proponents of this model emphasize the importance of economic growth, individual initiative, and reliance on the impartial economics of the market place. Such a model may be termed "conservative". According to Stevenson, the work of economist Gary Becker is in this tradition. The Becker model, she writes, "implies that employers have strong motives to operate efficiently and therefore, to desist from discriminating" (92).

The belief that a laissez-faire market serves to end inequity in the work place has been a basic theme of the present Republican administration. In his inaugural address, Reagan stated ". . . This administration's objective must be a healthy, vigorous, growing economy that provides equal opportunities for all Americans with no barriers born of bigotry or discrimination" (187). In the address however, he noted there was "no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate [to] the intervention and intrusion

in our lives that have resulted from unnecessary and excessive growth of government" (187). Remarks and actions of members of the Reagan administration make it clear that in their view affirmative action is an example of "intervention and intrusion" (see Cohodas).

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION MODEL

The Affirmative Action Model contends the problem of inequity cannot be solved with increased opportunities in the labor market because the inequities are creations of that market, either as hiring practices or as the maintenance of a sex-typed labor market structure. Lester Thurow's "liberal" theory of discrimination stands in contrast to Becker's "conservative" theory in this respect. According to Stevenson, Thurow "believes that government intervention is necessary to combat persistent discrimination" (93). Making a similar argument Safilios-Rothschild acknowledges the gains in the labor force made by women, but suggests these women were clearly superior to male cohorts. She argues the need for affirmative action if average women are to achieve equity. The International Women's Year Commission appointed by Gerald Ford agrees with this position. (National Commission on the observance of International Women's Year).

It should be noted that recommended actions falling within the affirmative action model range from required statements of non-discrimination to quota systems (see U.S. Commission on Civil Rights). In this paper, affirmative action assumes specific actions must be taken over and above the impartial workings of the labor market to guarantee women or minorities equal access to economic opportunities.

Argument

If the Increased Opportunity Model more closely approximates the workings of the labor market, we would expect that economic growth would generate an increase in female participation. This increase would be by greater absolute and proportionate numbers of women filling traditional male jobs, and by smaller wage disparities between the two sex groups. On the other hand, if the Affirmative Action Model more closely approximates the workings of the market, we should expect little change in the relative position of women even with increased economic opportunity.

It is not necessary to confine the application of the model to the nation as a whole. If the Increased Opportunity Model is viable, subnational units which exhibit increased economic growth should also exhibit increased female participation, providing the growth has been sustained long enough to allow increased opportunity to take effect.

If the Affirmative Action Model has viability, subnational units which exhibit increased economic growth, but which do not exhibit increased affirmative action should not show significant changes in female participation, even after long term economic opportunity.

The Setting

This study was conducted in the eastern half of St. Mary Parish (county), Louisiana. The geography of East St. Mary Parish has played a major role in its development. Almost all of the habitable land in East St. Mary Parish lies on or adjacent to the natural levees of Bayou Teche. This long thin ribbon of land is bounded on the north

by the overflow swamps of the Atchafalaya River, a major distributary of the Mississippi River. The Atchafalaya cuts through the Teche ridge between the towns of Morgan City and Berwick, and at that point intersects the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway before flowing southward approximately 20 miles to the Gulf of Mexico. When offshore oil exploration began in 1947, East St. Mary Parish was uniquely situated for several reasons. First, the Atchafalaya River provided one of the few navigable waterways through the relatively impenetrable coastal marsh. Second, the junction of the Atchafalaya River with the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway provided lateral (east/west) water transportation connections. Finally, the first offshore activities took place south of East St. Mary Parish establishing its prominence early in the growth and development of offshore oil and gas. Once the exploitation of this resource began in earnest, East St. Mary Parish became a case study of the boom town syndrome. With a population of 12,796 in 1940, a figure that had remained stable since the turn of the century, East St. Mary Parish experienced an almost 200 percent growth rate in the next thirty years. By 1970 the population was 36,227. From an economy oriented primarily toward fishing, farming and lumber, East St. Mary Parish moved to an economy based almost entirely upon offshore oil and gas and related secondary and tertiary industries (Manuel). The changes in the landscape and the life style of the inhabitants have been long term and profound. Over the past four decades there has been ample opportunity for adaptation to new working conditions and shifts to new higher paying jobs by local residents, both male and female.

DATA COLLECTION

The study was conducted in the spring of 1980 in East St. Mary Parish. The instrument used was a questionnaire completed by employees at their place of employment. Along with other items of information, the instrument obtained the yearly income, occupation, place of residence and sex for each respondent. It was impossible to delineate the population of employees because of extended commuter patterns. Therefore the sample consists of employees of a stratified random sample of employers listed in the yellow pages for East St. Mary Parish. Stratification was across type of industry (SIC Code) and number of employees. An attempt was made to obtain questionnaires from all employees of each sample firm. Out of 152 firms chosen, 107, or 70.4 percent, responded resulting in 1,560 completed questionnaires, or approximately 11.1% of the entire 1980 labor force of East St. Mary Parish (for details of sampling and coding procedures cf. Gramling).

Employment data for East St. Mary Parish was compared with employment data for the State of Louisiana which has experienced a more modest (35%) growth rate over the same period. Although East St. Mary Parish is a sub-unit of Louisiana, we felt that it was important to use the state for comparison since affirmative action is frequently enforced on a state level, and it could thus be assumed to be roughly equal in the two populations. Comparisons of the 1980 survey with 1970 census data should pose no problems as the intervening decade would only allow for a longer adjustment period, and

from the perspective of the Increased Opportunity Model greater female participation.

RESULTS

Tables 1 and 2 display occupational and yearly income distribution for males and females, in Louisiana and East St. Mary Parish. Although data were also collected on male/female distribution by industry, occupational distribution was chosen as a more accurate reflection of employment conditions (cf. Blau).

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here]

In terms of occupational distribution, women in East St. Mary Parish do not seem to have benefited from the general economic growth. While females show some gains in the craftsmen category, a traditional male dominated occupational group, they also show gains in the clerical category, a traditional female dominated occupational group. In addition most of the other gains are in the labor category, or in relatively unskilled jobs (see McLaughlin for definitions of male and female occupations).

Income distribution shows essentially the same pattern, with women moving disproportionately into the under $15,000 a year jobs, and showing little change in the over $15,000 a year jobs. While the percentage movement into the lower paying jobs may be primarily an artifact of inflation, gains in the higher paying jobs, which would indicate an ameloriation of inequities, are absent.

Obviously in economic boom situations some segments of the labor force are afforded increased economic opportunity. However, the question of who has benefited from economic boom in East St. Mary Parish remains unanswered. Tables 3 and 4 show that commuters (individuals who travel over 25 miles to work in East St. Mary Parish) are almost entirely male, and earn a disproportionately large percentage of the better paying jobs.

[Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here]

Conclusion

Clearly, a growing healthy economy does not in and of itself eliminate sex inequity. The sharp increase in employment opportunities in East St. Mary Parish has mainly benefited male workers. The local surplus of jobs has become an overflow of opportunity which draws in men who must commute, sometimes from considerable distance, rather than engaging women who already reside in the area. This paper does not address the causal factors leading to the observed distribution of male and female employees by occupation and wage. The research findings, however, do indicate that actions over and above the unaltered operation of the labor market will be necessary if changes in the status quo are to occur.

The findings have implications not only for women workers, but also for communities in general. Income which is potentially available to local female members of the labor force is flowing out of the community in the form of commuting male workers. Further

research is needed to more precisely delineate the impediments to increased female participation in order to effectively pinpoint appropriate actions. In addition the extent, and under what circumstances, income flows out of areas with increased economic opportunity is also an appropriate area for further investigation.

Table 1. MALE AND FEMALE OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION IN LOUISIANA AND EAST ST. MARY PARISH

	MALES				FEMALES			
	Louisiana 1970*		E.S.M.P. 1980		Louisiana 1970*		E.S.M.P. 1980	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Professional Technical and Kindred	90,163	56.0	102	69.4	70,862	44.0	45	30.6
Managers	87,119	83.7	83	84.7	17,009	16.3	15	15.3
Sales	47,446	60.6	45	58.4	30,882	39.4	32	41.6
Clerical	51,291	28.4	36	11.3	129,115	71.6	284	88.7
Craftsmen Foremen and Kindred	162,341	96.7	261	90.6	5,519	3.3	27	9.4
Non-transport Operatives	99,945	79.4	52	100.0	25,852	20.6	0	0.0
Transport Operatives	52,318	95.2	127	98.4	2,662	4.8	2	1.6
Service	57,237	42.7	55	50.4	76,817	57.3	54	49.5
Private Household	1,196	2.7	0	0.0	43,051	97.3	18	100.0
Labor	65,949	93.8	229	83.6	4,337	6.2	45	16.4
TOTALS	715,005	63.7	990	65.5	406,106	36.3	522	34.5

*U.S. Department of Commerce.

Table 2. MALE AND FEMALE INCOME DISTRIBUTION LOUISIANA AND EAST ST. MARY PARISH

Income x 1000	MALES				FEMALES			
	Louisiana 1970*		E.S.M.P. 1980		Louisiana 1970*		E.S.M.P. 1980	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
0- 5	510,740	45.0	50	27.8	623,680	55.0	130	72.2
5-10	337,286	76.6	119	32.3	102,887	23.4	249	67.7
10-15	131,344	93.0	193	70.2	9,885	7.0	82	29.8
15-25	42,914	93.5	426	92.6	2,946	6.5	34	7.4
Over 25	18,219	91.7	173	92.5	1,651	8.3	14	7.5
TOTALS	1,040,503	58.4	961	65.4	741,049	41.6	509	34.6

*U. S. Department of Commerce

Table 3. MILES TRAVELED BY SEX

	MALE		FEMALE	
	#	%	#	%
0-25	563	53.0	499	47.0
25-50	44	83.0	9	12.0
50-100	74	100.0	0	0.0
Over 100	268	97.5	7	2.5
Totals	949	64.8	515	35.2

Table 4. INCOME BY MILES TRAVELED TO WORK

	MILES							
	0 - 25		25 - 50		50 - 100		Over 100	
	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent
Under $5,000	160	95.2	4	2.4	1	0.6	3	1.8
$5,000-$10,000	322	94.7	7	2.1	3	0.9	8	2.4
$10,000-$15,000	203	75.7	13	4.9	7	2.6	45	16.8
$15,000-$20,000	124	49.0	12	4.7	21	8.3	96	37.9
$50,000-$25,000	91	48.7	7	3.7	18	9.6	71	38.0
$25,000-$30,000	42	53.8	1	1.3	12	15.4	23	29.5
$30,000-$35,000	19	48.7	3	7.7	6	15.4	11	28.2
$35,000-Over	44	76.6	3	5.1	3	5.1	9	15.3
Total	1005	72.2	50	3.6	71	5.1	266	19.1

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